

**Adapted from the foreword written by Sandra Herbst in *Setting and Using Criteria* by Gregory, Cameron, and Davies (2011)**

Middle school teacher, Barb Boerchers, recently asked her class the following question, "Let's say you didn't have criteria; you didn't know how you were being assessed. You just received feedback or a mark. Think about that. How would you feel and why would you feel that way?"

Three students, all male, immediately put up their hands and responded:

Student 1 – "I would feel disappointed because I didn't get a criteria sheet and I would have done much better cuz (sic) maybe I missed out on a punctuation but if I wanted to look at the criteria I'd probably want to scan the story or whatever for punctuation."

Student 2 – "Well I would feel kind of disappointed because I know I could have done better because I could have known what I was being assessed on."

Student 3 – "Probably most of the mistakes would have been stupid mistakes that I should have fixed and that I should have had right if I'd had the criteria. That would just make me feel very frustrated."

As we listen to this feedback from eight-grade learners, they remind us, in their own words, of what Rick Stiggins states: "Students can reach any target they know about and holds still for them." When teachers work not only to share the learning destination with their students, but to identify what quality evidence of learning looks like en route to the learning destination, then students have a much clearer picture of what they need to know, do, and articulate.

Consider this scenario:

A teacher returns a grade ten Science lab report to a student. She tells the student, "You can do better than this. If you just pull up your socks and try harder, the lab report will improve in its content and format." The teacher states that the student can re-do the work and submit it in the next couple of days to be reassessed. And then, the teacher walks away.

If that student is a 'good' student and has come to understand what the teacher wants – through observation, inference, or memory – then she can do what needs to be done. However, if that student does not understand what the teacher wants in a science lab report, she is left to wonder what to do next to improve it. She may attempt it a second time; she may change a section or a statement that was already correct; she may ask the teacher or her peers for help; she may make some random changes and hope for the best; or she may simply give up.

Let's replay that scenario:

A teacher returns a grade ten Science lab report to a student. She tells the student that she has added some written feedback based on the criteria that is posted on the wall

describing what makes up a quality science lab report in this classroom. In fact, a copy is attached to the student's work. Areas from the criteria that have 'not yet been met' are highlighted. The teacher states that the student can re-do the work and submit it in the next couple of days to be reassessed. And then, the teacher walks away.

In this case, the student has specific and descriptive feedback against the criteria that she has come to understand deeply. In fact, the student was part of co-constructing those very criteria several weeks ago. She recalls how the teacher distributed samples of what she considered to be quality science lab reports. The class discussed the elements of those reports and built criteria around it. Based on the feedback, the student can more confidently make changes to her report. She knows what needs to be changed and what can stay the same.

In *Testing, Motivation and Learning*, Harlen and Deakin Crick (2002) of the Assessment Reform Group state that teachers need to involve students more often in setting criteria and assessing themselves against that criteria. For many, the term "co-construction of criteria" has become the norm. It is something done together, as all learners in the community work alongside each other. Some teachers give students "sticky notes" to write down their brainstormed ideas. They move those "sticky notes" around to sort those ideas and then determine a category or criteria that best represents those details. Other teachers have students write down an idea on a long strip of paper. Students then get up and physically make the groups, talking and determining the sorting criteria as they move around the room. And still other teachers use electronic whiteboards to manipulate a list of brainstormed ideas into groupings that the class agrees upon. The possibilities are endless.

Quality classroom assessment has the largest positive impact on student learning and achievement ever documented (Crooks, 1988; Black and William, 1998; Miesels et al, 2003; Rodriguez, 2004). Co-construction of criteria and its use by students and teachers is a part of that picture. Perhaps, more importantly it provides students with voice and opportunity. Their voice is added to that of the teacher to talk about what is important in the learning process and product. As well, students develop a vocabulary of assessment in order to communicate their learning to others.

These same researchers have determined that the positive impact on student learning and achievement is especially true for those students who struggle the most. How true this is. For the student who struggled to intuit what the teacher wanted in the lab assignment, the criteria for success was much clearer in the second case.

Let us go back to where we began – in the classroom. Barb Boerchers, the middle years' teacher, explains it in this way: "By sharing the [process of setting] criteria with the students...they are engaged in their learning...it makes sense. [The student] knows this is what I have to do, this is why I have to do it and this is the strategy to get it done. And that's the whole thing – setting the floor so they can communicate."

## References

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